Expats in Japan

Tourists, Contracts, and the Long Game

By Aurora Mizutani

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A journalistic, plain-language guide to staying, leaving, and surviving the paperwork

Disclaimer

This book is a journalistic discussion of common expatriate experiences in Japan.

It draws on widely reported patterns and everyday observations, not on private personal data.

Experiences vary by person, city, job, language ability, and timing.

Nothing here is legal, tax, or immigration advice.

For official decisions, consult qualified professionals and current rules.

Any humor is meant to lighten the topic, not to mock individuals.

By the same Author

Japan for Tourists

Table of Contents

Introduction 9

Chapter 1: **The Two Japans: Vacation Japan vs Real-Life Japan** 13
Chapter 2: **Money Reality: Your Salary, Your Rent, and Your "Oops" Fund** 21
Chapter 3: **Work Life: Contracts, Renewals, and the Four-Year Surprise** 26
Chapter 4: **Language and Literacy: What You Can Read Changes What You Can Do** 35
Chapter 5: **Social Life: Friends, Workplaces, and the Mystery of Unsaid Rules** 40
Chapter 6: **Paperwork Planet: Visas, Taxes, and Why Deadlines Feel Like Boss Fights** 46
Chapter 7: **Culture Shock: The Emotional Roller Coaster Nobody Brags About** 52
Chapter 8: **Conflict and Law: How to Avoid Small Problems Becoming Big Ones** 57
Chapter 9: **Stayers: What Helps People Last Long Enough to Feel Stable** 63
Chapter 10: **Leavers: When Leaving Is Rational, and How to Exit with Dignity** 70

About the Author 76

Introduction

Japan is famous for being polite, orderly, and very good at pretending nothing unusual is happening. Foreigners, meanwhile, are famous for being foreign. Put those together and you get a daily comedy show, even when nobody is trying to be funny.

This book is built around a simple reality: people sort foreigners into mental boxes to save effort.

In popular talk, three labels show up again and again:

- **Tourists**: short-term visitors who spend money and are just passing through.

- **Expats**: long-stay residents, seen as contributing to society by working, paying taxes, and trying to fit in.

- **Immigrants**: people imagined as staying for good while "striving to change a country to align with another nation's culture."

Three Labels

These are not legal categories, and they are not always fair or accurate. But they are powerful. People use them as shortcuts to decide who feels "safe," who feels "useful," and who feels "worrying."

I'm writing this in plain language on purpose. If you can read a menu, you can read this.

I'll keep the ideas clear, the examples concrete, and the tone honest. There will be jokes, because if we cannot laugh at human confusion, we will just end up arguing on the internet, and nobody needs more of that.

You will also see a recurring theme: life gets easier when you have **buffers** (time and money), **options** (work and housing choices), and **anchors** (people who can help you). When those are missing, small problems stack up. When they exist, the same problems become manageable.

Chapter 1

The Two Japans:

Vacation Japan vs Real-Life Japan

Vacation Japan vs Real-Life Japan

People talk about Japan as if it were a veritable Walt Disney Resort for adults. It isn't. For many foreigners, Japan is two overlapping realities:

- **Vacation Japan**: convenience, safety, novelty, good food, clean streets.
- **Real-Life Japan**: housing rules, banking friction, office deadlines, and forms that quietly decide how long you last.

Japan also loves categories. Not in a villain way. More in a “please line up neatly” way.

So foreigners get mentally sorted: tourist, expat, immigrant. That sorting can shape how you are treated before you even open your mouth.

Tourists are often treated as low-risk because they leave.

Expats are tolerated because they are seen as contributing.

Immigrants, in anxious talk, get associated with permanence and change.

The category system leaks in real life. Those labels shape expectations long before you speak.

A helpful way to survive Real-Life Japan is to separate **the place** from **the process**.

The place can be wonderful. The process can be strict.

If you take the process personally, you get angry. If you treat it like a system, you plan. Planning is not romantic, but it keeps your life stable.

Why it matters: housing and banks are not just tasks; they shape your sense of control. When you can handle mail, phone plans, and basic admin without panic, you feel like a resident. When you can't, everything feels temporary.

Simple checklist (plain language):

1. Write your next deadline down.
2. Keep copies of key documents (paper + photo on your phone).
3. Ask early, not late.
4. Build a small buffer of time and money.
5. Keep one reliable contact for housing and one for banking/admin.

Field note:

Chris arrives confident.

The first month is smooth because a coworker helps with banking.

Month three brings official mail with a polite tone and a real deadline. Chris delays, not from laziness, but from fear of doing it wrong.

When Chris finally goes to the office, half the required documents are missing. The staff stays calm and says, “Please return with the housing documents.” Chris leaves thinking, “Maybe I’m not cut out for this.”

The truth is simpler: the system rewards preparation, not confidence.

Chapter 2

Money Reality:

Your Salary, Your Rent, and Your "Oops" Fund

Money Reality

Money is where “Vacation Japan” stops being cute. It’s also where the tourist/expat split becomes obvious.

Tourists are treated as consumption on legs: they spend, they take photos, they leave.

Expats and long-stay residents live in the less glamorous layer: rent, deposits, key money, utilities, health insurance, pension paperwork, and unpredictable life costs.

A strange moral economy shows up here:

- When foreigners spend money as tourists, they're praised.
- When foreigners earn money as workers, they're tolerated.
- When foreigners struggle financially, they're sometimes judged as "not prepared."

That double standard is common in many countries.

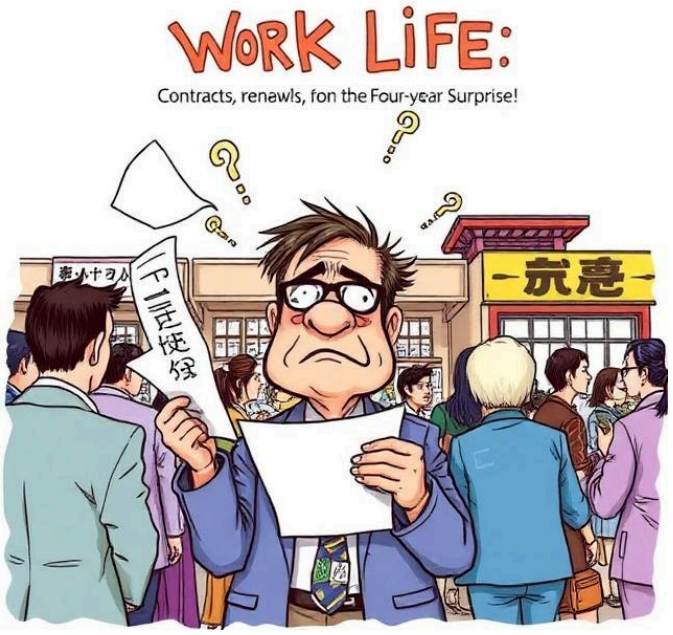
Japan just delivers it with better manners.

- Your budget needs an **“oops fund”** because admin mistakes cost time and money.
- Financial stress makes everything else worse: language becomes harder, conflict feels bigger, and paperwork feels personal.
- “Simple” expenses in Japan often come with “simple” forms, and the forms are rarely simple.

Chapter 3

Work Life:

Contracts, Renewals, and the Four-Year Surprise



Work Life

The word “expat” is slippery. In casual talk it can mean “foreigner with a job.”

Often it does not mean “foreigner who belongs.”

That’s the uncomfortable part.

Work is moral currency in Japan: it signals you are contributing. That buys tolerance.

It does not automatically buy belonging.

Workplaces add their own layer:

- Indirect communication, hierarchy, and consensus are often treated as professionalism.
- Directness can be read as aggression.
- Asking “why” can be read as rebellion, even when it’s just clarification.

Many companies claim they want “global talent,” then react badly when someone behaves globally.

The contradiction is: be different, but not too different. Be innovative, but quietly.

The good news is you will learn. The bad news is you will learn by making mistakes.

Four-Year Surprise

In some situations, the "Four-Year Surprise" catches potential Expats off guard when their stay is abruptly cut short due to an unexpected job termination.

Employers often opt to release a foreign employee to sidestep the requirement of offering them a permanent, full-time position, as mandated by company policy.

This policy states that if a foreign worker has been dependable and efficient for four years while working part-time, they are eligible for a full-time contract after their fourth year of temporary employment, making it harder for the company to terminate them in the future.

As a result, companies frequently choose to let go of an employee before reaching the four-year threshold and instead bring in new, enthusiastic foreign arrivals.

Delusions of Grandeur

Some Expats tend to turn down job opportunities that they believe are beneath them, fearing it would lower their status as English Teachers.

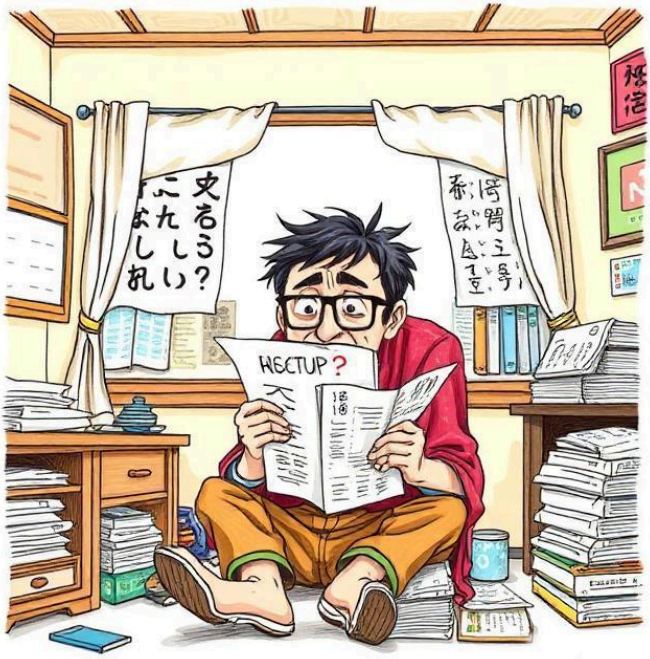
It's important to mention that we haven't seen many foreigners working in convenience stores or taking on jobs that others, who are determined to survive in Japan, are willing to accept.

It's fair to say that working in a convenience store isn't seen as a great career move and the pay is quite low. Nevertheless, many foreigners who are committed to staying in Japan have willingly taken on the role of convenience store attendants as a temporary job, helping them get by until they find a permanent position.

Chapter 4

Language and Literacy:

What You Can Read Changes What You Can Do



Language and Literacy

Language isn't just communication.

It's access.

A person can speak conversational Japanese and still be trapped by written systems: contracts, city mail, bank notices, legal terms, medical forms.

Translation is not the same as comprehension.

An interpreter can translate words while the meaning still stays foggy.

This is also where media and authority quietly matter.

If most people around you treat official wording as “obviously fair,” you will be pressured to accept things you do not fully understand.

The gap between language and legal meaning is wide.

Here are a few tips for foreigners who want to avoid unnecessary stress:

- Learn the vocabulary of your life: housing, work, tax, health, school.
- Keep a “life glossary” on your phone.
- If you don’t understand a document, don’t guess. Ask, translate, confirm.

Chapter 5

Social Life:

Friends, Workplaces, and the Mystery of Unsaid Rules

Social Life

Daily life in Japan runs on one major rule: **do not cause trouble**.

This rule protects you from open conflict, and it also hides real feelings behind polite distance.

Foreign residents often adapt by becoming "extra polite." They avoid complaints. They keep conversations light. They try not to stand out. Sometimes this is respect. Sometimes it's self-defense.

Neighborhood associations (chōnaikai / jichikai) are where the "inside/outside" feeling becomes real. You can be welcomed warmly and still feel like you walked into a meeting where everyone already knows the script.

Over-Tourism

Over-tourism can also spill into resident life.

People annoyed by visitors sometimes become less patient with foreign residents, even though the resident is not the one blocking sidewalks for selfies.

Categories leak, and strangers pay for other strangers.

Quiet truth: direct contact can soften stereotypes.

People stop seeing “a foreigner” and start seeing “the parent from the school gate” or “the neighbor who always helps during storms.”

The story shifts from category to person.

Chapter 6

Paperwork Planet:

Visas, Taxes, and Why Deadlines Feel Like Boss Fights

Paperwork Planet

This is the part where the system becomes real.

Politics and institutions love simple symbols, and “foreigners” can become a single symbolic object in policy talk. That leads to category compression: tourists, students, workers, residents, and long-term families get discussed as one blurry “issue.”

Election seasons amplify this. “Protect our way of life” can sound comforting. It can also become coded language about outsiders.

Once the categories blur, the fear spreads.

A common phrase in public talk is “system misuse.”

Sometimes it refers to real abuse. Sometimes it refers to one sensational story repeated until it feels like a trend. Either way, the phrase is emotionally powerful because it implies fairness is being exploited.

If paperwork were a sport, Japan would medal every year.

When in doubt, bring one extra document. Then bring two more.

Field note:

Sam receives a tax notice and assumes it can wait.

Two weeks later, the "polite reminder" arrives.

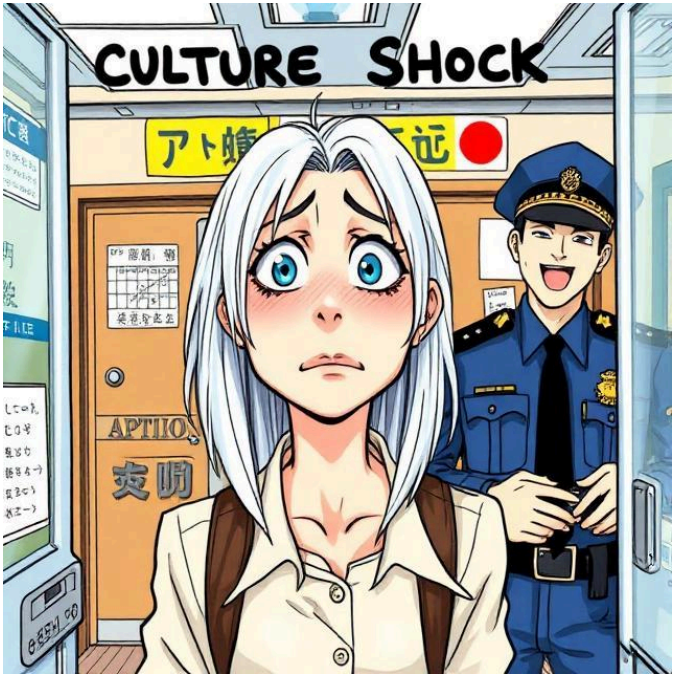
When Sam finally goes in, the office staff is calm, but the answer is firm: "Please bring your residence documents and these forms." The system isn't angry.

It's indifferent. That's why it wins.

Chapter 7

Culture Shock:

The Emotional Roller Coaster Nobody Brags About



Culture Shock

Culture shock isn't just homesickness. It's identity fatigue.

The emotional danger isn't one dramatic event. It's the slow build: a string of small misunderstandings that make you doubt yourself.

Some foreigners cope by staying in "tourist mode" emotionally: keep things light, don't attach too much, don't expect deep belonging. It reduces conflict.

It also keeps you permanently outside.

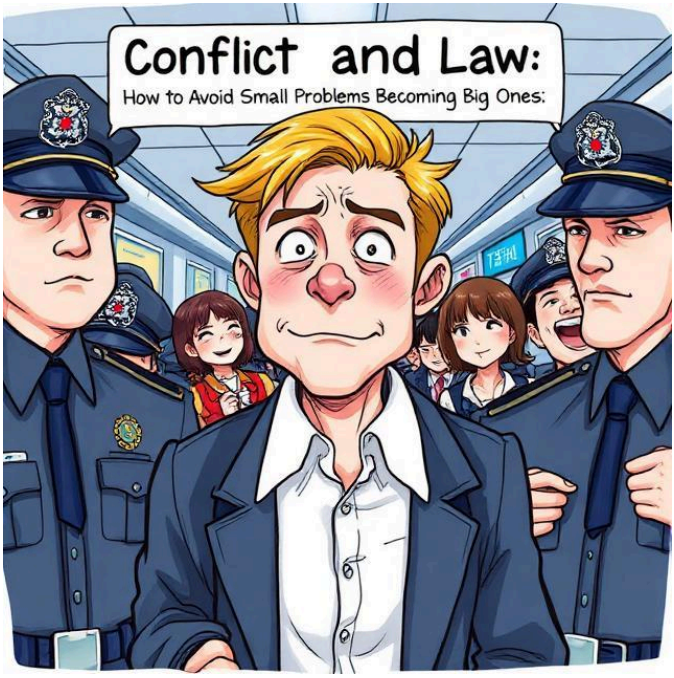
Others become the “model expat”: grateful, careful, always polite, always praising. This can earn goodwill. It can also become exhausting.

If you perform gratitude nonstop, you start to wonder whether you are allowed to be an ordinary person with ordinary frustrations.

Chapter 8

Conflict and Law:

How to Avoid Small Problems Becoming Big Ones



Conflict and Law

This is where “being foreign” can become a multiplier.

Conflict often starts small: noise complaints, alcohol-related misunderstandings, online posts, police contact, landlord disputes. The risk is escalation through misunderstanding and narrative.

Crime Reporting

Crime reporting and viral clips can also distort perception.

If the suspect is foreign, the story can become "foreign crime" instead of "a crime by a person." That expands fear from individual to category.

Corrections rarely stick as well as initial headlines.

Practical principle: when stakes rise, precision matters.

Keep records. Use calm language. Don't assume you understood a warning just because you understood the words.

Chapter 9

Stayers:

What Helps People Last Long Enough to Feel Stable

Stayers

Staying isn't about romance. It's about systems.

Long-term residents can remain "guests" in other people's minds. Buffers, anchors, and routines matter, but so does **permanence**.

If immigration anxiety is about permanence, schools are where permanence becomes real.

Children are the future. Humans get especially protective when the future is involved.

Foreign children entering Japanese schools bring practical challenges (language support, parent communication), and those are usually solvable.

Children Are the Future

The emotional reaction can still be bigger than the practical issue because a foreign child can be treated as a symbol of demographic change.

That creates double standards:

- A foreign child who excels may be praised as "amazing," but treated as an exception.
- A foreign child who struggles may be used as "proof" of incompatibility.

Mixed families can act as bridges, and they can still face subtle exclusion.

Key reality: the tourist/expat/immigrant mental sorting fails over time.

People grow up. People marry. People stay.

Society has to decide whether someone becomes “inside” or remains a permanent outsider.

Chapter 10

Leavers:

When Leaving Is Rational, and How to Exit with Dignity

Leavers

Leaving is sometimes the most rational decision you can make. Not because you "failed," but because the cost is no longer worth it.

Some foreigners stay "light" to avoid friction. Some perform endless gratitude to remain acceptable.

Some ask for equal treatment and clearer rights, which can be reasonable and still trigger backlash if interpreted as "trying to change Japan."

Foreigners That Learn Stay

Foreigners in Japan do not just receive categories. They learn them. They respond to them. They sometimes play along and sometimes resist. This shapes what Japanese people see, which then shapes the next round of perception. It's a loop.

Useful rule:

If someone says “maybe,” treat it like a weather forecast: possible, but plan for rain.

Exit dignity basics:

- Close or transfer contracts early (phone, utilities, rent, bank).
- Confirm pension/tax steps with dates in writing.
- Keep copies of every cancellation and final payment.
- Leave a paper trail that future-you can defend.

About the Author

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Independent investigative journalist Aurora Mizutani is the daughter of socialite, journalist, and actor Olabisi Ajala. An alumna of Kansai Gaidai University and a graduate of London Metropolitan University, she double majored in English Literature and Creative Writing.

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